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| The Melian Dialogue  **This is a shortened account of the dialogue between Athens and Melos in 416... Athens were offering an alliance and tribute paying status in their empire or destruction...**  ***Athenians:*** *... We on our side will use no fine phrases saying, for example, that we have a right to our empire because we defeated the Persians, or that we have come against you now because of the injuries you have done us – a great mass of words that nobody would believe. And we ask you on your side not to imagine that you will influence us by saying that you, though a colony of Sparta, have not joined Sparta in the war, or that you have never done us harm...the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and in fact* ***the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.*** |
| ***Melians:*** *... you should not destroy what is our common protection, the principle of* ***fair play*** *and just dealing...since your own fall would involve terrible vengeance* |
| ***Athenians:*** *... We will now proceed to show you that* ***we are come here in the interest of our empire****, and that we shall say what we are now going to say, for the preservation of your city. We do not want any trouble in bringing you into our empire, and we want you to be spared for the good of us both.* |
| ***Melians****: And how could it be just as good for us to be slaves and you masters?* |
| ***Athenians:*** *You, by giving in, would save yourselves from disaster;* ***we by not destroying you, would profit from you.*** |
| ***Melians:*** *So you would not consent to our being neutral, friends instead of enemies, but allies of neither side?* |
| ***Athenians:*** *No; because your hostility does not injure us...****but if we were on friendly terms with you it would be seen by our allies as a sign of weakness, whereas your hatred is evidence of our power.*** |
| ***Melians:*** *Is that your subjects’ idea of fair play, to put those who have nothing to do with you in the same category with peoples that are most of them your own colonists, and some conquered rebels?* |
| ***Athenians:*** *As far as right and wrong are concerned they think that there is no difference, and that* ***if any maintain their independence it is because they are strong, and that if we do not attack them it is because we are afraid;*** *so by conquering you we will extend our empire and its security.* ***We rule the sea and you are weak islanders****...therefore you can not escape* |
| ***Melians:*** *... if you stop us from talking about* ***justice*** *and invite us to obey your* ***interest****, we also must explain ours, and try to persuade you, if the two happen to coincide. How can you avoid making enemies of all existing neutrals who shall look at this case and see that one day or another you will attack them too? ...* |
| ***Athenians:*** *We are concerned about islanders like yourselves, outside our empire, and our unhappy subjects, who would be the most likely to act in a reckless manner and lead themselves and us into obvious danger.* |
| ***Melians:*** *... then* ***we who are still free would be cowards*** *and weaklings if we failed to face up to you rather than submit to slavery.* |
| ***Athenians:*** *Not if you are sensible, the contest not being an equal one, with honour on one side and shame on the other, but* ***a question of saving your lives and not resisting those who are far too strong for you****.* |
| ***Melians:*** *... if we surrender, then all our* ***hope*** *is lost at once, as long as we fight there is still hope left* |
| ***Athenians: Hope, that comforter in danger! You are weak*** *and your fate depends on the single movement of the scale...encouraging hope leads men to ruin* |
| ***Melians:*** *We know the difficulty involved in opposing your power and fortune unless the terms be equal.* ***But we trust that the gods may grant us fortune as good as yours, because we are fighting for what is right against what is wrong, and as for what we lack in power, we trust to our allies the Spartans, who are bound by honour and because we are their kinsmen, to come to our help. Our confidence then is not as irrational as you think.*** |
| ***Athenians:*** *We think we have as much right to the favour of the Gods as you do. Our aims and actions are perfectly consistent with the beliefs men hold of the Gods* ***– to rule whatever one can*** *And it is not as if we were the first to make this law, or to act upon it when made: all we do is to make use of it, knowing that* ***you and everybody else, having the same power as we have, would act in precisely the same way as us...***  ***As to the Spartans, we do not envy your folly. In matters that concern Sparta they are quite good, but they believe what serves their interests is just and this will not help you in your absurd quest for safety. As a rule, the Spartans court as little danger as possible.*** |
| ***Melians****: But we believe that they would be more likely to face danger for our sake ... as they would lose the confidence of their friends in Hellas if they don’t help us and our nearness to Peloponnese makes it easier for them to act, and we are of the same race and share the same feelings.* |
| ***Athenians:*** *Yes, but* ***what an intending ally trusts to is not the goodwill of those who ask his aid, but a decided superiority of power for action;*** *and the Spartans look to this even more than others. It is hardly likely therefore that while we are in control of the sea, they will cross over to an island.* |
| ***Melians:*** *But they would have others to send...and they may invade your land* |
| ***Athenians:*** *... we are struck by the fact that, after saying you would consult for the safety of your country, in all this discussion you have mentioned nothing which men might trust in and think to be saved by.* ***Your strongest arguments depend upon hope and the future, and your actual resources are too scanty to give you a chance of survival against the forces that are opposed to you at this moment****...You will therefore be showing an extraordinary lack of common sense if you fail to reach a conclusion wiser than you have so far. There is nothing disgraceful about giving into the greatest city in Hellas when she is offering you such reasonable terms. Think over the matter, therefore, after our withdrawal, and reflect that this is your country you are discussing, that you have not more than one, and that* ***its future for good or ill depends on this one decision.*** |